Hello and good evening!

A poet from the rolling countryside of Scotland. A writer exploring the nuances of love and life. A fornicator…

So now that I have introduced myself, I would like to talk a bit about Rabbie Burns. Or has he liked to call himself - Spunkie.

Burns was known for his beautiful use of the Scots language, his affinity for nature, the working classes and his love for women. Lots of women. He Partied. Moved in both humble and wealthy circles. Took many lovers. He transgressed many boxes that he was put into, he was an artist in the truest sense of the word.

During Rabbie's life as a Farmer, labourer and writer, Scotland was in transition. There were big industry changes happening - and cultural and linguistic shifts too. As we were moving closer to English norms, Scottish people were advised to **"think in English, feel in Scots."**

But Burns felt, thought and wrote in Scots, and is celebrated as our national Poet because he was arguably the last writer of his kind before English and Anglo-Scots took hold.

In a letter addressed to his old school master He wrote **"I seem to be the one sent into the world to see and observe."**

See and Observe - the beginnings of any great writing.

Rabbie's plethora of work, from hundreds of poems, to songs, is stunning … and seismic, especially since he only made it to 37 years old.

Speaking of youth, I'd like to give a shout out to the young poets of Edinburgh and Dublin that myself and Kevin P Gilday have had the pleasure of mentoring.

To watch these young writers SEE and OBSERVE the world around them, and create their spoken word pieces was a true joy.

Burns often spoke of class inequality. In his song "For A' That and A' That" he shines a light on the humanity of the working class.

"The Honest man, though e'er sae poor,
Is king o' men for a' that."

And it's his words that pass the lips of people the world over when a new year begins.

"We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet
For Auld Lang Syne."

The very day in 1796 that Burns was buried - with full Military Honours - one of the loves of his life Jean Armour gave birth to his son Maxwell. Even in death he was creating poetic metaphors.

Being a feminist poet myself, I would now like to read **The Rights of Woman,** which I hope gives some insight into Burns' adulation for the lassies.

He compares our heads to flowers, but we're not here to critique, we're here to celebrate.

One thing I have learned from all the research I have done on Burns, is that it's perfectly acceptable to feel conflicted about him.

The Rights of Woman

While Europe's eye is fix'd on mighty things,
The fate of Empires and the fall of Kings;
While quacks of State must each produce his plan,
And even children lisp the Rights of Man;
Amid this mighty fuss just let me mention,
The Rights of Woman merit some attention.

First, in the Sexes' intermix'd connection,
One sacred Right of Woman is, protection.
The tender flower that lifts its head, elate,
Helpless, must fall before the blasts of Fate,
Sunk on the earth, defac'd its lovely form,
Unless your shelter ward th' impending storm.

Our second Right - but needless here is caution,
To keep that right inviolate's the fashion;
Each man of sense has it so full before him,
He'd die before he'd wrong it - 'tis decorum.
There was, indeed, in far less polish'd days,
A time, when rough rude man had naughty ways,
Would swagger, swear, get drunk, kick up a riot,
Nay even thus invade a Lady's quiet.

Now, thank our stars! those Gothic times are fled;
Now, well-bred men - and you are all well-bred -
Most justly think (and we are much the gainers)
Such conduct neither spirit, wit, nor manners.

For Right the third, our last, our best, our dearest,
That right to fluttering female hearts the nearest;
Which even the Rights of Kings, in low prostration,
Most humbly own - 'tis dear, dear admiration!

In that blest sphere alone we live and move;
There taste that life of life-immortal love.
Smiles, glances, sighs, tears, fits , flirtations, airs ;
'Gainst such an host what flinty savage dares,
When awful Beauty joins with all her charms
Who is so rash as rise in rebel arms?

But truce with kings, and truce with constitutions,
With bloody armaments and revolutions;
Let Majesty your first attention summon,

Ah! ca ira! The Majesty Of Woman!

Even though Burns is not alive today in 2023, I feel like he would be invested in fighting for the inequality of the oppressed, in pointing out the widening gap between the rich and the poor, in defending nature in the looming threat of climate change.

Burns isn't here but his words are - and they can still give us meaning and hope. Let's commit to not only SEEing and OBSERVING but IMPLEMENTING CHANGE where we can.

I'm very proud to have been asked to make this toast, so please everybody raise your glasses as we honour the life of a:

Storyteller
Poet
Pioneer
Ladies man
Punk
Romanticist
Realist
Rebel
Radical
Raconteur… The one and only Robert Burns.